

Message Text

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ACTION AF-10

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USIA-06 EB-08 AID-05 /084 W
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FM AMEMBASSY ACCRA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2891
INFO AMEMBASSY LAGOS
AMEMBASSY LOME
AMEMBASSY ABIDJAN
AMEMBASSY OUAGADOUGOU
AMEMBASSY LONDON

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 ACCRA 2453

LONDON FOR SEITZ

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PINS, PGOV, GH
SUBJ: GHANA ON EVE OF REFERENDUM

REF: A) ACCRA 2252 (NOTAL), B) STATE 078267 (NOTAL)

1. SUMMARY: MARCH 30 REFERENDUM WILL DECIDE WHETHER GHANA WILL ADOPT A "NON-PARTY" UNION GOVERNMENT (A CONCEPT BEING PUSHED HARD BY HEAD OF STATE ACHEAMPONG AND RULING SUPREME MILITARY COUNCIL (SMC) OR WILL RETURN TO PARTY POLITICS (A STEP FAVORED BY OPPOSITION MOVEMENT, MANY PROFESSIONALS, SOME POLICE AND MILITARY, AND NUMEROUS CITIZENS FED UP WITH ACHEAMPONG'S MISMANAGEMENT OF ECONOMY). WHILE UNION GOVERNMENT REMAINS POORLY DEFINED, CRITICS BELIEVE IT IS ESSENTIALLY AN ATTEMPT BY ACHEAMPONG TO STAY ON IN POWER AS PRESIDENT OF A "CONSTITUTIONAL" GOVERNMENT RATHER THAN AS CHAIRMAN OF THE SMC. ON EVE OF REFERENDUM, POPULAR MOOD SEEMS TO US GENERALLY APATHETIC. REGIME HAS LOST
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ITS EARTIER CONFIDENCE THAT UNION GOVERNMENT WILL BE A SHOO-IN BUT STILL BELIEVES CONCEPT IS LIKELY TO BE APPROVED. ALTHOUGH THE OUTCOME IS BASICALLY UNPREDICTABLE, A RELATIVELY SMALL TURNOUT AND A NARROW WIN FOR UNION GOVERNMENT APPEAR PROBABLE BUT FAR FROM CERTAIN. REGARDLESS OF OUTCOME, GHANA'S SEVERE ECONOMIC PROBLEMS WILL REMAIN AND POTENTIAL FOR POLITICAL INSTABILITY WILL STILL

BE HIGH. END SUMMARY.

2. DESPITE SEVERAL MONTHS OF INTENSIVE CAMPAIGN EFFORTS BY ACHEAMPONG, SMC AND ITS CAMP FOLLOWERS, MASS OF VOTERS SEEMS RATHER DISINTERESTED IN FORTH COMING REFERENDUM. SOME BELIEVE IT WILL BE RIGGED, OTHERS (INCLUDING MANY OPPONENTS OF UNION GOVERNMENT) NEVER REGISTERED LAST YEAR AND THUS CANNOT VOTE NOW, AND MOST CITIZENS SEEM SO PRESSED TRYING TO MAKE ENDS MEET THAT THEY HAVE LITTLE TIME OR ENERGY TO GET ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN REFERENDUM POLITICS. MOREOVER, THERE IS A PERVASIVE FEELING HERE THAT CORRUPTION, MISMANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATIVE BUNGLING WILL CONTINUE EVEN IF ACHEAMPONG IS UNSEATED AND ANOTHER REGIME COMES TO POWER. POLITICAL EXPECTATIONS THUS REMAIN LOW. EVEN THE DRAMATIC AND UNEXPECTED APPEARANCE IN LATE JANUARY OF AN OPPOSITION GROUP (PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT FOR FREEDOM AND JUSTICE) HEADED BY LT. GEN. AFRIFA -- A CHARISMATIC YOUNG OFFICER WHO ENGINEERED 1966 COUP AGAINST NKRUMAH -- HAS FAILED TO CRYSTALLIZE WIDESPREAD DISCONTENT WITH ACHEAMPONG'S MISRULE AND WELD IT INTO A COHESIVE POLITICAL FORCE. PEOPLE ARE UNHAPPY WITH ECONOMIC CONDITIONS BUT AT THIS TIME DO NOT SEEM READY TO TAKE TO THE BARRICADES OR TO TURN OUT IN FORCE AT POLLS TO DEFEAT UNION GOVERNMENT.

23. NEVERTHELESS, ACHEAMPONG AND THE SMC ARE CLEARLY CONCERNED THAT UNION GOVERNMENT MIGHT BE DEFEATED. REGIME HAS
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REACTED STRONGLY TO CRITICISM OF UNION GOVERNMENT, PARTICULARLY BY CHURCHES (REF A). CHIEF OF DEFENSE STAFF AKUFFO HAS DEPLORED CHURCH LEADERS' ACTION AND SAID "IT IS RATHER SAD THAT THEY HAVE EMBARKED ON SUCH VILE PROPAGANDA WHICH THREATENS THE VERY BASIS OF THE SOCIETY." AIR FORCE COMMANDER BOAKYE HAS URGED CHRISTIANS TO RESIST MOVES BY THEIR LEADERS TO DRAG THE CHURCHES INTO POLITICS. ACCRA REGION CHIEFS HAVE ALSO WEIGHED IN AGAINST CHURCHES' INVOLVEMENT IN LOCAL POLITICS. GOING ON THE OFFENSIVE HIMSELF, ON MARCH 27 ACHEAMPONG REVEALED WHAT HE SAID WAS A PLOT BY CERTAIN INDIVIDUALS TO DISRUPT THE FORTHCOMING REFERENDUM BY CUTTING OFF WATER AND ELECTRICITY SUPPLIES ON MARCH 30 AND BY INCITING GASOLINE STATION ATTENDANTS TO GO ON STRIKE THAT DAY. ACHEAMPONG ADDED THAT HE HAD A LIST OF THE PLOTTERS AND WARNED THAT ANY ATTEMPT TO DISRUPT THE REFERENDUM WOULD BE MET WITH FORCE. THIS IS THE FIRST WE HAVE HEARD OF SUCH A "PLOT" AND WHILE WE CANNOT RULE OUT WILDCAT STRIKES BY PROFESSIONALS OR PETROLEUM WORKERS, WE DOUBT OPPOSITION IS THIS WELL ORGANIZED OR SO HIGHLY MOTIVATED. ON THE OTHER HAND, CHURCHES' INTERVENTION HAS STRENGTHENED LEGITIMACY OF ANTI-UNION GOVERNMENT FORCES.

4. IN THE ABSENCE OF PUBLIC OPINION POLLS, A FREE PRESS OR OTHER TELLTALES OF POPULAR FEELING, IT IS HARD TO PREDICT OUTCOME OF NATIONWIDE REFERENDUM WITH ANY CONFIDENCE. FOR THEIR PART, AND DESPITE THEIR NERVOUSNESS, ACHEAMPONG AND THE SMC EXPECT THAT UNION GOVERNMENT WILL WIN. THEIR ATTEMPTS TO SUBORN ELECTORAL COMMISSIONER ABBAN TO RIG THE REFERENDUM HAVE FAILED, BUT THERE WILL PROBABLY BE OPPORTUNITIES WHERE JUDICIOUS USE OF FORCE OR CASH CAN INFLUENCE THE VOTING ITSELF OR COUNTING OF VOTES. EVEN PUTTING ASIDE THIS POSSIBILITY, THE REGIME SEEMS TO THINK THAT THE "NO" VOTE ON UNION GOVERNMENT WILL BE CENTERED IN MAJOR CITIES; THE RURAL MAJORITY IS EXPECTED TO FOLLOW THE ADVICE OF GOVERNMENT AND CHIEFS BY VOTING "YES".
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5. A RELATIVELY SMALL TURNOUT AND A NARROW WIN FOR UNION GOVERNMENT APPEAR PROBABLE BUT FAR FROM CERTAIN. ACCORDING TO OFFICIAL (AND PROBABLY SPURIOUS) FIGURES, NEARLY 4.3 MILLION GHANAIANS REGISTERED LAST YEAR TO VOTE IN REFERENDUM AND IN GENERAL ELECTIONS PLANNED FOR MID-1979. GIVEN APATHY, ADMINISTRATIVE CONFUSION, LACK OF TRANSPORT, AND FACT MARCH 30 WILL NOT BE AN OFFICIAL HOLIDAY, IT IS

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 ACCRA 2453

LONDON FOR SEITZ

DOUBTFUL THAT ANYTHING LIKE 43 PERCENT OF GHANA'S
10 MILLION PEOPLE WILL IN FACT GET TO THE POLLS. DURING
REGISTRATION PROCESS LAST NOVEMBER, IT WAS DIFFICULT EVEN
TO FIND REGISTRATION BOOTHS. WHILE VOTING BOOTHS MAY
PROVE LESS ELUSIVE

ON MARCH 30, THEY ARE NOT YET HIGHLY
VISIBLE IN ACCRA (ALTHOUGH PAPERS HAVE CARRIED LOCATIONS
FOR ACCRA AND OTHER REGIONS). VOTING PROCEDURE ITSELF IS
QUITE CUMBERSOME: REVIEWING EARLY VOTING HELD ON MARCH 23
FOR MILITARY, POLICE, ELECTORAL COMMISSION AND OTHER
OFFICIALS WHO WILL BE ON DUTY MARCH 30, GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED
GHANAIAAN TIMES THUNEERED EDITORIALY, "WE CANNOT REMEMBER

ANY PREV2OUS VOTING PROCEDURE THAN CAN MATCH THURSDAY'S
(MARCH 23) IN DEGREE OF COMPLICATION, CONFUSION AND, INDEED,
ARBITRARINESS." THERE ARE ALSO RUMORS THAT TOO FEW "NO"
BALLOTS HAVE BEEN PRINTED, RAISING THE POSSIBILITY THAT
SOME VOTERS MAY BE GIVEN ONLY A "YES" BALLOT. UPSHOT
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IS THAT VOTING IS LIKELY TO SEEM A DIFFICULT, TIME-CONSUMING
AND POSSIBLY POINTLESS ACT TO MANY CITIZENS. SOME WILL
WANT TO AVOID POLLING PLACES TO STEER CLEAR OF ANY
DISTURBANCES WHICH MAY BREAK OUT. HOWEVER, MARCH 23
VOTING WAS CONDUCTED PEACEFULLY AND WE ARE CAUTIOUSLY
OPTIMISTIC THAT REFERENDUM WILL BE, TOO.

6. ON BALANCE, A UNION GOVERNMENT VICTORY, WHILE NOT
ASSURED, IS THUS LIKELY. BASICALLY, WE FIND IT HARD TO

BELIEVE THAT ACHEAMPONG AND THE SMC -- WHO STILL HOLD
MOST OF THE GOOD CARDS IN THIS GAME -- WILL PERMIT THEIR
PET CONCEPT TO BE DEFEATED. EVEN IF THE REFERENDUM IS
CONDUCTED HONESTLY, THERE WILL BE STRONG SOCIAL PRESSURES,
PARTICULARLY IN RURAL AREAS, TO VOTE "YES". IN
THEORY, ONLY VOTER HIMSELF SHOULD KNOW WHETHER HE CASTS
A BLUE "YEE" OR A RED "NO" BALLOT. IN PRACTICE, HOWEVER,
WE ARE NOT CONFIDENT THAT THE SECRECY

WILL BE PRESERVED
IN VILLAGES, WHERE MOST ACTIONS ARE PUBLIC, MANY VOTERS

ARE ILLITERATE AND ALMOST ALL ARE BEHOLDEN TO CHIEFS,
MILITARY AND POLICE -- OFFICIALS WHOSE PARENT OROANI-

ZATIONS FAVOR UNION GOVERNMENT. IN ADDITION, THERE IS A

GOOD CHANCE THAT, IN SOME AREAS AT LEAST, THUGS
WILL TRY TO INTIMIDATE VOTERS INTO SUPPORTING UNION
GOVERNMENT.

7. REGARDLESS OF OUTCOME OF REFERENDUM, ACHEAMPONG
REGIME WILL STILL BE IN POWER AND GHANA'S SEVERE ECONOMIC
PROBLEMS WILL STILL BE WITH US -- TRIPLE DIGIT INFLATION,
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A GROSSLY OVERVALUED CURRENCY, COLLAPSING PUBLIC SERVICES,
FOOD SHORTAGES, PERVASIVE CORRUPTION AND INEPT MANAGEMENT.
IT IS CONCEIVABLE THAT IF UNION GOVERNMENT WINS BY A REAL
LANDSLIDE, ACHEAMPONG MIGHT FEEL SECURE ENOUGH TO CHANCE
UNPOPULAR AND HENCE POLITICALLY RISKY REFORMS IN ORDER
TO STABILIZE ECONOMY. IF, HOWEVER, TURNOUT IS LOW
AND MARGIN FOR UNION GOVERNMENT NARROW, HE WILL PROBABLY
CONTINUE TO POSTPONE URGENTLY NEEDED REFORMS.

ALTERNATIVELY, IF UNION GOVERNMENT IS DEFEATED,
ACHEAMPONG'S HOLD ON POWER WILL BE GRAVELY THREATENED
AND HE WILL NOT WANT TO JEOPARDIZE IT FURTHER BY PAINFUL
ECONOMIC SHOCKS. THUS PROSPECTS FOR ECONOMIC CHANGE APPEAR
BLEAK AND SO LONG AS THE ECONOMY REMAINS SO DEPRESSED,
THE POTENTIAL FOR POLITICAL INSTABILITY WILL REMAIN
HIGH.

8. PER REF (B) ASSESSMENT OF REFERENDUM OUTCOME WILL BE
CABLED BY APRIL 2 TO LAGOS FOR MOOSE AND LAKE.
SMITH

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Message Attributes

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